



The Impact of the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons on West African States: An Analysis of the Sierra Leone Civil War

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Abstract. The article is undertaken through the lenses of a documentary narrative that provides details of the history of political power challenges in Sierra Leone and its culmination in the destructive civil war from 1991 till the war was declared over in 2002. Furthermore, the central role of the illicit use of small arms and light weapons to prosecute the war, especially by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) is highlighted. Here, the proliferation of SALW and the negative implications of the ease with which it could be sought, obtained and deployed is interrogated. Also, the paper discusses the importance of regulating access to small arms and light weapons in the post-conflict area because of the consequences on future security concerns.

In the final analysis, the article highlights the various regional initiatives aimed at curbing the menace of the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons. In conclusion, an all-encompassing approach is recommended to ensure the total elimination of illicit dealing in small arms and light weapons; there must be an articulated regulatory framework acceptable to all stakeholders, for there to exist a modicum of national security within West African states, and by extension, a secure sub-region.

Key words: Civil-war, Conflict, Small arms, Light weapons, RUF

Introduction

Sierra Leone is one of the many countries that depicted the character of the post cold-war conditions in African states. The immediate post cold-war period was characterised by internal conflicts with severe negative consequences for internal cohesion and political stability of African states. Aside from the internationally unacceptable processes of engagements, the conflicts were prosecuted with the use of the highly lethal small arms and light weapons. This article partly interrogates the effects of the consequences of small arms and light weapons on the ten-year Sierra Leone civil war.

The work commences with an analysis of the acceptance of small arms and light weapons as the most dependable weapon for prosecuting wars by Africa's warring parties. Instructively, the character of the weapons and the nature of the international boundaries within the sub-region make it imperative for SALW to be the quintessential weapons for prosecuting wars that became part of the environment as an aftermath of the post cold-war conditions. Similarly, the work analyses the Sierra Leone political conditions from the state formation period to demonstrate the weaknesses of the internal structures and institutions and the inability to curtail the ensued civil-war and its escalation. In this respect, the proliferation of SALW ensured the war was prolonged and became highly lethal, thereby confirming the destructive nature of small arms and light weapons and their categorisation as weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the work highlights the various efforts made, especially at the sub-regional level to curb the menace of SALW. The final part of the work presents some workable recommendations, drawn from the experiences of Sierra Leone, that could ensure the stemming of crisis in Africa in general, and West Africa in particular.

The Utility of Small Arms and Light Weapons

Typically, any act of violence and the extreme case of conflict- war, is perpetrated with the aid of weapons deployed by all sides in order to subdue or annihilate the opponents. To this extent, each epoch in the development of humanity boasts of its unique weapons of war that are germane to the pursuit of its agenda. Recorded tales of wars in ancient Rome and Greece are replete with various

kinds of weapons used in the prosecution of wars. Some of these deadly and injury-inflicting weapons include; spears, swords, catapults and knives.

With the advancement in technology, other weapons for prosecuting wars, with no less lethal capabilities, such as dane-guns, and at some point, machine guns and bombs, became the weapons of choice for warring parties. However, as the world continued to advance in the development of science and technology, so also is the continuous advancement in the capacity to destroy, kill or maim. Subsequently, the international system became awash with series of weapons of mass-destruction, such as; ballistic missiles, landmines, rocket launchers, biological and chemical weapons, and nuclear weapons. Indeed, the technologically-driven lethal weapons have limitless capacity, to the extent that an entire city could be destroyed with the drop of a bomb. Japan experienced the wrath of nuclear weapons during the Second World-War, when two of such bombs were dropped in the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This resulted in the death of countless number of people and the unquantifiable destruction of two cities, the consequent surrender of Japan and the change in the country's foreign policy focus.

The destructive and damaging effects of these weapons subsequently became a concern for the international community, especially the nuclear powers. The possible havoc the weapons could wreck on the international system as evinced in the Japanese experience encouraged the initiation of global coalition to limit and prohibit the use of weapons of mass destruction, such as; chemical and biological weapons, and nuclear weapons. In an unprecedented initiative, the two cold-war adversaries, the United States and the former Soviet Union, in time, realised the dangers of the arms' race in the Cold-War era, and thus, organised bilateral talks called the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks I (SALT I) aimed at global armament control. This eventually became the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) and Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) Agreements. These talks led to more armament control collaborative efforts in later years, such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I, II and the New START). All these efforts were basically aimed at controlling and managing the stockpiling and the deployment of weapons of mass destruction, which

includes perhaps the most dangerous weapon in recent times, the unmanned aerial vehicle (drone).

Instructively, the end of the Cold-War came with a new challenge for Africa. African countries moved from the challenges associated with being the Cold-War terrain of the super-powers to devising home-grown methods for tackling internal political confrontations that resulted in crisis of immense proportions. The dynamics of international relations which favoured support for dictatorial regimes by the Cold-War adversaries was transformed to situations in which suppressed agitations for democratisation and socio-economic empowerment and political inclusiveness became the order of the day for many African states. Thus, many of the states became embroiled in various crisis of attrition, such as, guerrilla warfare, rebellions, 'pretentious' revolutionary agitations, among others. Expectedly, massive cache of weaponry was required for the prosecution of the agitations. This weaponry, in the mould of small arms and light weapons were found to be readily available in African states, thereby fuelling the crisis, and often times, prolonging them.

In terms of planning and execution, the resultant civil-wars are prosecuted often time, with the warring parties going against the norms of international conventions. As mentioned earlier, there are associated reasons deriving from both the external environment and the African internal environment that provide the platform for relatively easy and smooth possession of small arms and light weapons. From the external dimension, the easy access to illicit small arms and light weapons is related to the changed circumstances of the military hardware companies in Eastern European, consequent upon the dramatic end of the Cold-War. Specifically, a number of Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine and Bulgaria were left with massive stockpiles of Soviet-era small arms and light weapons after the Cold-War. Thus, they had to seek new markets outside of Europe, and Africa; for its many pockets of crisis provided the perfect market. Musah's (2001) argument in this respect is poignant. According to the author:

"While the thrust of international efforts to curb proliferation tend to concentrate on the manufacture and supply of new

weapons, a major pipeline of SALW remains the stockpiles that were pumped into Africa in the 1970s and 1980s by the ex-Soviet Union, the USA and their allies to fan proxy interstate wars”.

What is however incontrovertible is that the arms transfers to Africa were not only used to escalate existing crisis, but also played huge roles in the initiation of series of conflicts. At the internal level, small arms and light weapons have become easily accessible as a result of, among others, poor stockpile management, the corrupt act of state officials who participate in violating extant rules and the recirculation of existing stocks on the continent as a result of porous borders and the complicity of officials.

However, the spate with which small arms and light weapons proliferate Africa and the destructive tendencies it engendered alarmed the international community and prompted efforts to stem the tide. For this purpose, the United Nations General Assembly provides a working definition thus:

Any man-portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, is designed to expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive, excluding antique small arms and light weapons or their replicas. Antique small arms and light weapons will be defined in accordance with domestic law. In no case will antique small arms and light weapons include those manufactured after 1899.

Similarly, the ECOWAS Convention (2006) on the management and control of small arms and light weapons provides the following definition:

All components, parts or spare parts for small arms or light weapons or ammunition necessary for its functioning; or any chemical substance serving as active material used as propelling or explosive agent.

Indeed, the negative impact of the illicit proliferation of SALW on the political and socio-economic conditions requires no reiteration. The continued and permanent devastation caused by these weapons are constant reminders of the fragility of institutional mechanisms and structures for protection within African states. In reference to the West Africa scenario, Keili (2008) submits that:

“SALW are extreme tools of violence in West Africa for several reasons. Small arms are durable, highly portable, easily concealed, simple to use, extremely lethal and possess legitimate military, police and civilian uses. In West Africa, these weapons are cheap and widely available; they are also lightweight, and so can be used by child soldiers, who have played such a significant role in recent conflicts in West Africa”.

This scenario played out in the Sierra Leone civil war, where the proliferation of illicit SALW made possible through the assistance of neighbouring states-Liberia, Gabon, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and Libya ensured that the war lasted for about a decade, and provided the post-war Sierra Leone with litters of SALW that have been used for banditry, gang-related crimes, political assassination, among others, and thus, a never-ending security dilemma.

The Political Trajectory of the Sierra Leone Civil War

The emergence of hitherto disparate traditional African societies into modern post-colonial state formations required the practise of lessons learnt during the period of colonial tutelage. This meant the inculcation of processes through the structures and institutions existing in the Western world. Politically, the emergent African states were constrained to embrace western-styled democratic principles, within the framework of either the presidential or parliamentary system of government. In respect of the path to economic sustainability, the western-oriented laissez-faire capitalist system was the bedrock, while most of the African states easily adopted the westernised socio-cultural orientation.

The adoption of the systems of the West 'hook, line and sinker' did not however fortify the new African states against complex challenges of statehood, which continue to threaten the survival of many of them, over five decades after independence. In effect, despite the fact that most African states spent over half a century as colonies, the post-independent period for many has been bedevilled by crises of immense proportions, deriving from the inability to articulate generally acceptable political, economic and social relations. In general, the indigenous leadership has fared poorly in the attempts to nurture the emergent states into politically stable, economically viable and socio-culturally harmonious post-modern state formations. Evidence of unending crisis abound- Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya, and majority of the others, continue to exhibit various indicators of unstable political future. Sierra Leone has also not been immune to this experience; the country was engaged in a prolonged civil war, with its negative consequences of distortion on all facets of national life.

Sierra Leone has a unique feature, similar only to Liberia's path to modern statehood. These two countries are distinguishable from all other African countries by the nature of their state formation processes, which partly involved the 'dumping' of freed slaves from Europe and America in Africa, where the former slaves could live as free men. Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone served as one of the major abodes for freed slaves in the late eighteenth century. The area was bought by Britain from King Naimbana to specifically serve as the base of liberated slaves. The slaves came in droves from all parts of Africa, and included those freed from America and the West Indies. The latter set became known as the Creole people. In their quest for re-settlement, the freed slaves, settlers and immigrants sought the cooperation and acceptance of the indigenous peoples, who through various methods and means seeded parts of the country to the newcomers.

Unlike the case in nineteenth century and mid twentieth century Liberia, and up until perhaps the 'revolution' of 1980, there were no distinct lines of official or institutional segregation in the relationship between the indigenous tribes and the Creoles in Sierra Leone. As expected under a democratic system, the political power relationship favoured the majority indigenous tribes, but

without the marginalisation of the minority. Instructively, Sierra Leone's political challenge transcended the issue of political marginalisation of the minority immigrant group, but involved the larger and more challenging task of political stability for the country.

Upon the granting of political independence by Britain in April 1961, Sir Milton Margai emerged as the first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, having been elected as Chief Minister of Sierra Leone in 1953 when the country was granted local ministerial powers by Britain. The first multi-party elections in independent Sierra Leone took place in 1962 in which the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won majority seats in parliament and Margai was returned as Prime Minister. Riding upon the dwindling popularity of the SLPP after the death of Milton Margai, and the take-over of government by his brother, Albert Margai, the All People's Congress (APC) won a slim majority in parliament in the 1967 general elections and its vocal leader, Siaka Stevens became the Prime Minister Elect.

The post-independent imbroglio marked a turning point in the political history of Sierra Leone; within a space of one year, there had been three military coups in Sierra Leone. Upon winning the election, the APC candidate-Siaka Stevens was denied the opportunity of assuming leadership by disgruntled officers in the military led by General Lansana, whose actions truncated the democratic process by ensuring that the Prime-Minister was not sworn in, but instead placed under house arrest. Thereafter, another military coup led by Brigadier Juxton-Smith took place. This group of coup plotters formed the National Reformation Council, suspended the constitution and took over power. Finally, about a year later, General Bangura also executed a successful coup against the Juxton-Smith junta, and thereafter formed the Anti-Corruption Revolutionary Movement (ACRM). The Bangura government eventually handed over power to the government of Siaka Stevens.

The coming to power of the APC under Prime Minister Stevens changed the political landscape of Sierra Leone and put a question mark on the party's democratic credentials. In a curious twist, Stevens displayed intolerant tendencies towards the opposition in contrast to his actions and utterances

while he was a leading opposition figure during the regime of the SLPP. Sesay (1999) notes:

“It is rather ironic that the APC which had enjoyed a wider democratic space while in opposition, a position which it exploited fully, is the same party that destroyed democracy and democratic institution in Sierra Leone when it came to power in 1968”.

The government further entrenched its dictatorial credentials by fraudulently amending the constitution to convert the country into a one-party state. As Sesay (1999) observes:

“The introduction of a one-party constitution in 1978 which formalised the de facto party system which had been in place since the 1973 elections, was perhaps the most devastating blow to democracy in the country”.

Under Steven’s watch, Sierra Leone effectively became one of the poorest countries on earth; the economy collapsed beyond redemption, public infrastructures became dilapidated, and it became almost impossible for the masses to access the basic necessities of life. In addition to these ills, was the entrenchment of corruption and its elevation to a state art. Sesay (1999) rightly alludes to the submission that:

“More than any other regime in post-independence Sierra Leone, the APC foisted a very corrupt and exploitative ruling class on the people, and in the process, also ensured their unprecedented impoverishment”.

While the citizenry suffered untold hardship, the powerful elites, their allies and cronies, lived the kind of life that was far removed from the reality of the Sierra Leone state. Indeed, the evil ‘troika’ of favouritism, mediocrity and nepotism became the official policies of government in dealing with the people. The government sustained itself by its systemic association with a loyal army

that was complicit in the degeneration of Sierra Leone. By gagging the press, repressing the civil society and pandering the military, the masses were powerless in containing the excesses of Siaka Stevens and his ruling APC. Sesay's summary of APC's rule in Sierra Leone between 1968 and 1985 is poignant. According to the author:

"The net result (of the rule) was that a country endowed with human and natural resources and whose people once boasted of several firsts in West Africa became one of the most exploited, undemocratic and least developed in the world".

In the ensued uncertain political climate, Siaka Stevens anointed his trusted protégé, Joseph Momoh as his successor. It is a known fact that the importance of a trusted successor was to guarantee Stevens' peaceful retirement. Momoh fitted the bill perfectly- he successfully carried on Stevens' legacy of unbridled corruption, ineptitude, favouritism, among other ills. Within a short time of Momoh's reign, a majority of the citizenry had become further traumatised, and agitations for a change of circumstances had become rife. While the students had legitimately sought for open political debates, and indeed, a resort to multi-party democracy, a revolutionary movement- Revolutionary United Front (RUF) had moved to the trenches to wage a war against the government (Abdullah, et.al. 1997). But very much like most other issues of national concern, the Momoh regime could not navigate through the ripples caused by the war. In the end, the consequences of sloppy handling of the war became the government's nemesis.

Eventually in 1992, some of the soldiers at the war-front became disgruntled, returned to Freetown and led an attack against the government. The mutiny was led by the young officer, Valentine Strasser, whose major complaint centred on the government's handling of the war-efforts, and especially the neglect suffered by the troops at the war front. As claimed by Strasser, the troops were exposed to the superior fire-power of the rebel group, and therefore were not adequately prepared for the war. Strasser set-up the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) to run the affairs of Sierra

Leone. The government's major focus was to end the war, and also lead Sierra Leone back to democratic rule. Strasser's effort was to culminate in the emergence of a democratic government by 1996, but his regime was overthrown towards the end of the transition programme. This was based on suspicions that Strasser was working towards a transmutation to a civilian President. This motivated the execution of a coup d'état barely a month before the end of the transition programme.

The coup d'état led by Brigadier Bio completed the transition programme that had been initiated and almost completely executed by Strasser before being overthrown in which Tejan Kabbah, the candidate of the Sierra Leone People's Party emerged the winner of the election, and was sworn-in as the President of Sierra Leone. In just about a year after the return to multi-party democracy, a military coup executed by Corporal Gborie ousted the Kabbah government from power. This group of soldiers set up the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) and immediately installed General Paul Koroma as the leader of the group and the Head-of-State of Sierra Leone. The Koroma administration took the first practical step in ending the raging civil war by inviting the RUF to join the government in an unprecedented AFRC-RUF coalition agreement, which made the leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh, the Vice-Chairman of the AFRC, and the *de facto* Vice-President. However, in less than a year in charge, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group which had been busy in restoring peace in neighbouring Liberia, got involved in the Sierra Leone political debacle by overthrowing the military leadership and reinstating the democratically elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in 1998.

The long and harrowing years of dictatorship, the political instability consequent upon the various forms of coup d'état; palace coup, counter-coup, bloody and bloodless coup that adorned the political landscape of Sierra Leone coupled with the economic downturn and the social devastation could not compare with the hardship occasioned by the insurgence of the RUF that led to the civil war in Sierra Leone. The creation of the RUF was inspired by the activities of the Charles Taylor led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Formed by groups of disgruntled elements within the civilian populace, the

group was determined to change the dynamics of Sierra Leone's national life through a revolution. Led by Foday Sankoh, the group's sole aim was the overthrow of the APC government that had rule for twenty-four years. The group marched from Liberia into Sierra Leone's Eastern Province in March 1991, and within a month had established a base at the diamond rich Kailahun District. The access to alluvial diamonds allowed for illicit mining which was traded for weapons required to prosecute the war. At the height of its reign, the RUF was estimated to be composed of approximate twenty-thousand members.

The war was notoriously unique for some of the internationally unacceptable standards exhibited by the RUF. First among the list of atrocities committed by the RUF was the enlistment of child-soldiers for combat. These soldiers were forcefully drafted and often times induced with drugs, such that they would become maniacal and fearless. Indeed, children between the ages of eight and eighteen played significant roles in combat. It became common knowledge that children and adults were forcefully drafted into the RUF combat-group, and in the event of refusal of conscription, the person faced the possibility of summary execution. It is estimated that about eleven thousand children were forced to play unacceptable roles in the civil-war.

Another unconventional tactics of the RUF that defied international dictates on the conduct of warring parties was the widespread practice of cannibalism. Series of cases were reported that highlighted the height of man's inhumanity to man. With the use of machetes, the RUF combatants amputated the arms, hands and legs of fellow Sierra Leoneans. In extreme cases, women's wombs were sliced open to confirm the sex of an unborn child. In summary, the RUF was engaged in appalling cruelty in its effort to change the government in Freetown. The group's influence and capacity to inflict collateral damage on Sierra Leoneans was not only possible because of the inability of the Momoh government to win the war, but because of the tremendous support received from Liberia and Libya.

Liberia and Libya played less than inspiring roles in the Sierra Leone civil-war. Both countries provided massive support for the RUF through training and the provision of weapons required to prosecute the war.

Instructively, the leadership of the RUF immersed itself in Gadaffi's Green-Book as the intellectual and philosophical basis for their agitations. The case of Liberia in the conflict was even more compelling. As the southern neighbour of Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor's Liberia openly armed and trained members of the RUF. Charles Taylor's purpose for supporting the RUF is partly due to the warm reception given by the Freetown government to the ECOMOG contingent. Taylor's intention therefore was to ensure the RUF toppled the government and strategically weaken the powers of ECOMOG. Furthermore, Taylor was profiting economically from the war, because the rebel group was in control of the diamond-rich area of Sierra Leone. It is therefore submitted that "access to Sierra Leonean diamonds therefore provides Taylor with significant financial resources to keep him solvent and in power" (Berman, 2001). It is estimated that the between \$30-50 million per annum earned by RUF from the illegal sale of diamonds pass through Liberia under Taylor. In return for these favours, Taylor readily provided the RUF with arms and ammunitions.

The arms in the possession of the RUF, may not have been highly sophisticated, yet were, absolutely lethal, and for the ease with which they were acquired caused unprecedented damage during the war. Musah (2001) captures the role of external actors in the Sierra Leone case where he argues that "the SALW debate can best be appreciated if placed at the point of intersection between the internal governance processes and the external influences that shape them".

The Commanding Presence of SALW in the Sierra Leone Civil War

Before the commencement of the Sierra Leone civil war, the issue of illicit proliferation of SALW had been on the front-burner of regional security concerns in the West-Africa sub-region. Given the phenomena of porous borders, the absence of effective regional mechanisms and the lack of political will by the national authorities to confront the menace of trans-border illegalities, groups of bandits often have easy rides for conducting their nefarious activities along the West coast of Africa. In a similar fashion, politically motivated groups also take advantage of the lax conditions of the environment around the West coast to

proliferate weapons required for the pursuit of their agendas. As Keili (2008) observes, “the uncontrolled movement of SALW has exacerbated conflicts and brought destruction, untold hardship, poverty and underdevelopment” to the region. Quite unfortunately for Sierra Leone, the civil war in neighbouring Liberia made it inevitable that SALW would be easily accessible to the rebel group- the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

For the Sierra Leone civil war, the major weapons deployed were the small arms and light weapons, and indeed, they were used to the most destructive capacity. Indeed, the Sierra Leone civil war clearly showed that small arms and light weapons have become the most potent weapons of mass destruction. The RUF, composed of a highly indisciplined and untrained persons, akin to a ragtag army, found expressions in the availability of SALW. The availability of SALW empowered the gangs and provided them the leverage to turn dangerous and vicious, even within a relatively short period of handling the weapons. The relative lack of sophistication and the near-uncomplicated processes for handling these weapons made them the weapons of choice for the rebels. Furthermore, the proliferation, continued supply and recycling, made the weapons relatively easily available thereby aiding the prolongation of the war, and underlining the viciousness of the RUF rebels in the use of the weapons. Keili’s (2008) comment in this regard is instructive, according to the author:

“The civil war in Sierra Leone where SALW were the main engine of violence saw some 50,000 people killed, 30,000 had their limbs amputated, and 215,000-257,000, women were victims of sexual violence”.

The importance of SALW to RUF’s prosecution of the war is further highlighted by the SAS statistics of weapons available to the group:

“The RUF possessed a wide array of weapons including rifles such as AK-47, assault rifles of Chinese, Soviet and eastern European origin, Belgian FN-FALs, German G3s, and

British Lee-Enfield no. 4s, and sub-machine guns such as the German Sten and Israeli Uzi”.

In addition, “the RUF possessed Chinese 12.7mm machine guns, various 60mm, 82mm and 120mm mortars, and small numbers of anti-tank and surface-to-air-missiles”. In the disarmament programme instituted to pull-out the various weapons from post-war Sierra Leone, it is recorded that “some 12,500 weapons and 250,000 rounds of ammunition had been collected” by May 2000. A part breakdown of some of the weapons returned is: AK-47 rifle (4,287); AK-74 rifle (1,072); FN FAL rifle (440); SLR rifle (451); G-3 rifle (940); Machine gun (140), etc.

The danger in the possession of these weapons, especially for the untrained is that, “SALW are particularly prone to rights abuse, as they are easy to maintain, manipulate and are deadly”. Musah (2001) further argues:

“The SALW facilitated wars led and executed by people other than the military, in many instances child combatants. These civilians-turned combatants usually benefit from the very minimal, if any, combat training and are hardly aware of international human rights laws. As a consequence the civilians- women, the elderly and children- constitute legitimate targets during the war”.

In direct reference to the West Africa situation, Musah (2001) perceptively notes:

“SALW have been called ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in West Africa with good reason. The availability of SALW in West Africa has long-term and widespread pernicious effects. Even when conflicts have been officially terminated, small arms have remained, illicitly, in the post-conflict zones of Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone, making it easy for fighting to recommence. Even when further combat is avoided, the easy availability of small arms means that they have become common tools of violence, used in criminal

activities and ethnic and political rivalries. Armed ex-combatants may become affiliated with local gangs, warlords or militias. This enduring climate of violence has often resulted in refugees and a displaced persons fearing to return home after a conflict has ended”.

According to existing statistics:

“Conservative estimates put the number of SALW in circulation worldwide at 500 million, seven million of which are guessed to be circulating in West Africa alone with comparable figures in the Great Lakes conflict vortex”.

In reference to recent state of affairs as regards the destructive capacity of SALW, Keili (2008) observes thus:

“Millions of West Africans have been killed or displaced as a result, and an immeasurable amount of property has been destroyed. SALW have been used to grossly violate human rights, to facilitate the practise of bad governance, to subvert constitutions, to carry out coup d’états and to create and maintain a general state of fear, insecurity and instability”.

For these purposes, governments of West African states under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) initiated the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. The major aim of the Protocol is:

“... to create and consolidate the conditions in which West Africa can react promptly to crisis situations, particularly by strengthening cooperation in the areas of ‘conflict prevention, early warning, peacekeeping operations, the control of cross-border crime, international terrorism and proliferation of small arms and anti-personnel mines’, as well as by

formulating and implementing ‘policies on anti-corruption, money-laundering and illegal circulation of small arms’.

Furthermore, the Protocol specifically identifies the illicit proliferation of SALW as detrimental to the security circumstances of the sub-region and therefore provides for institutional mechanisms for both the control of the proliferation and preventive measures against the illegal circulation of small arms. The highlight of the control measures include:

- C
control the importation, exportation and manufacture of small arms and eradicate the illegal flow of such arms;
- R
register and control the movement and use of legitimate arms stocks;
- D
detect, collect and destroy all illicit weapons;
- E
encourage member states to collect and destroy all surplus weapons.

The preventive measures as outline in Article 51 includes:

- D
developing a culture of peace;
- Tr
training for military, security and police forces;
- E
enhancing weapons control at border posts;
- E
establishment of a database and regional arms register;
- C
collection and destruction of (surplus and) illegal weapons;
- F
facilitating dialogue with producers and suppliers;

- Reviewing and harmonising national legislation and administrative procedures;
- Mobilising resources.

Conclusions

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has inauspiciously deepened the spectre of challenges confronting the African continent as a whole, and indeed, the West Africa sub-region. The uncontrolled presence of SALW has not only led to conflict, it has also exacerbated conflicts on various occasions, and indeed, encouraged the revisit of old conflicts, thereby, undermining the security arrangement of the sub-region, and also impacting negatively on all aspects of life. This damaging effect of SALW is put more succinctly by Keili (2008), in these words:

“Over the last decade, the links between SALW proliferation, conflict, security and development have become better recognised and understood within the sub-region. It is now accepted that sustainable development is seriously threatened by recurrent violent armed conflict. The proliferation of small arms has erased decades of development and progress; indeed, it has further entrenched poverty within West Africa. The interdependence of small arms control, security and development speaks to the core development mandates of poverty eradication, enhanced human security, inclusion and governance. Communities affected by small arms violence have become socially and economically marginalised. This has all grossly undermined progress toward West Africa meeting the targets of the Millennium Development Goals”.

In the final analysis, the efforts geared towards ‘exorcising’ the dangers of the proliferation of SALW from Africa in general and West Africa in particular

must be all-encompassing, and indeed, requiring the dedication and commitment of all major stakeholders. In this respect, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. T
he institutionalisation of good governance regime in member-states: It has been observed that there is a strong relationship between 'bad' and inept governance and the emergence of rebel movements, which on the long run require the use of small arms and light weapons to prosecute their agenda of forceful political power acquisition. Similarly, the absence of good governance often leads to social, political and economic crisis that engender conflict, which would require SALW for prosecution. However, a good governance regime has the ability to minimise the tendencies for armed struggle and the regular security challenges that confront every nation.
2. In
stitutional limitation of weapons in circulation: Based on the principles of the ECOWAS Protocol, illicit and surplus weapons are to be destroyed. In effect, the relevant national institutions must work with the regional body to ensure that unlawfully acquired weapons are collected, and destroyed accordingly. These efforts would aid the curbing of circulation and proliferation of such weapons.
3. Le
gal supervision and centralisation of data on weapons: It is recommended that member-states of ECOWAS should work towards the harmonisation of the legal frameworks to define and categorise small arms and light weapons, in order for regionally applicable enforceable mechanisms against unlawful possession and illicit proliferation.
4. In
itiation of a dialogue or partnership with arms manufacturers or suppliers: Without meaning to close down the arms' manufacturing industry, West African leaders can curb the flow of illicit proliferation of weapons by engaging and forming partnerships with the manufacturers

of the weapons. The idea is that through cooperation with the manufacturers, there would be transparency and openness in the sale and movement of arms and weapons from the manufacturers to the buyers. This would eliminate the possibilities of these weapons going to the wrong hands.

5.

E

establishment of a data base and regional arms register: This process would bring about the identification of each weapon that gets into the sub-region. With such identification, weapons are easily traceable, whether that are moved from one country to the other, sold or borrowed for use.

It is a welcome development that the ECOWAS Protocol approves the establishment of national commissions. Essentially, the aim of the national commissions is to combat the proliferation and illicit circulation of small arms. These commissions are responsible for coordinating all the efforts at the national levels and the harmonisation of the positions of member-commissions at the sub-regional level. Furthermore, the national commissions “bring their work to the attention of bilateral or multilateral institutions, help the authorities to comply with their international obligations to combat the proliferation of small arms” (Diarra, 2005). Through these efforts, there is an end in sight for the curbing and elimination of the proliferation and circulation of small arms and light weapons, and by extension, the ease with which rebel movements like the RUF, and also non-political armed groups can have unlawful access to the possession of small arms and light weapons.

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